

The Door in the Sky study guide

Study guide part 1

About the Author:

Janice Clark grew up in a house full of books, with a mother who read to her children each night, and a father who made up stories to entertain the family on camping trips. Naturally, she grew up with a fondness for books and a desire to share stories with children. Now she writes for her children and grandchildren, but especially for her own inner child, who loves tales of magic and mystery.

Author Ray Bradbury claims his stories are written by a twelve-year-old boy who lives inside his mind and likes to come out to play. Ms. Clark shares her mind with a nine-year-old girl with an overactive imagination, who refuses to grow up and likes to ask questions. What if the crabby old lady across the street was *really* a fairy-tale witch? What if that dream about a skeleton in a cigar box *really* happened? What if the scratching noise on the roof wasn't just the wind, but a baby dragon? What if cats could talk? What if you could climb a moonbeam?

Occasionally reverting to a more grown-up role, Ms. Clark also writes poetry, essays, and reviews. But the children's stories are more fun.

About the Inspiration:

In Sammy's first adventure, I was writing for a granddaughter who was mourning the loss of her cat, so one of the first questions I asked myself was "What if the cat didn't really die, but just went somewhere else, to a magical world where she would be young and healthy again?" That was the beginning of *The Mountains of the Moon*. After artist J. W. Kalin painted the wonderful cover picture of Sammy and Selena looking out of one of the magical doorways in the hall of doors, I started asking some new questions. "How do you get down from a door in the sky? What's down there? Then I started writing, because that curious inner child of mine wanted to know what would happen next, and I usually don't know that until I write it.

Sammy's a brave girl, but she still has secret fears, just like everyone. I gave her a personal challenge, then let her learn, through helping others, a way to deal with it. The lesson was one I learned as a child, and still apply to this very day. Not all fears can be overcome. Sometimes you have to "do it scared."

About the story:

Sammy is facing the fourth grade fitness test, which includes the dreaded rope climb. She's not so much afraid of getting hurt, as she is that she'll fail and people will laugh. She doesn't want to bother her busy mother with her fears. With the help of her cat, Peaches, she climbs the moonbeam path for a second visit to Selena's castle, looking for advice. But Selena has problems of her own, worrying about the loss of communication with her father, who's off fighting the forces of The Darkness.

Sammy puts her own concerns aside to try to cheer up Selena. With some help from the cats, and the cooperation of a friendly dragon, Selena is able to arrange a trip to visit an old friend. There she finds a mystery box, spellbound with dark magic. Sammy musters up the

courage to help break the spell, and finds a treasure trove, including a magic mirror that lets Selena see that her father is alive and well.

With her new-found understanding of dealing with fear, Sammy is able to help a friend at school to make it through the rope climb.

The Characters:

Sammy (Samantha Jane): A young girl with a lot of curiosity and courage

Kerri: Sammy's friend at school

Sammy's mom: a loving but busy single mother, doing her best to make a living

BB (Princess Buttermilk Biscuit): A very old cat who used to live with Sammy, but now lives with Selena in her magic world

Peaches: Another cat, one of BB's descendants, who now lives with Sammy

Selena: BB's friend, a fairy princess who lives in a castle at the end of the moonbeam path

Kalindra: A helpful dragon

Winona: Selena's friend on the world of Iskandar

Study guide, part 2: Questions for Discussion

1. Sammy has a secret fear. She's afraid that if her classmates find out, they'll make fun of her. What do you think would happen if they knew?
2. Sammy tries to deal with her problem by avoiding it. Does that work? What other choices could she make?
3. Sammy's trying hard to be a helpful and considerate daughter. She doesn't want to bother her busy mom with her problem, so she only shares the good things about her school day. Do children often keep secrets from their parents? Why would they do that? Do you think it's a good idea? Why or why not?
4. Sammy wants BB and Selena to solve her problem, but she finds out Selena has problems, too. Sammy decides her problem can wait, and tries to cheer up Selena. How would you handle a situation like that? Would it be hard to help a friend, when you need help yourself?
5. Sammy gets dizzy when she looks down from the door in the sky. Fear of high places is called acrophobia. People with this condition can't help being nervous and dizzy looking down from high places, but they can learn to live with it. Do you know anyone who has this problem? What would be your advice to them?
6. Selena wants to visit her friend, but she's afraid the magic doorway will close up before she can get back, leaving her stranded. What does BB do about it? Is BB really only doing what she wants to do, or is this her way of helping Selena? Have you ever done a favor for someone but pretended you weren't doing anything special? Some people like to do "sneaky good deeds" and try not to get caught. How do you think it makes them feel, to do something nice in secret? Is that better than getting a lot of praise for what you do? Or are both ways good?
7. Riding a dragon would be exciting, but scary. How do you think you would feel about it? If you had a chance to ride a dragon, would you do it? Why or why not?
8. Neither Winona nor Selena can open the spellbound box, even though they have some fairy magic. Sammy figures out a way to do it. What does she do? Do you think her solution could work with other problems as well?
9. By the time Sammy is ready to go back to her world, she's figured out a way to deal with her fear. What does she decide to do? Do you think this was a difficult decision? What else could she have done?
10. Sammy and Kerri are both surprised to discover that they share the same fear. Is this unusual, or is it likely a lot of people have the same problems, but are afraid to share them? Does talking to someone else about a problem make it easier to deal with? Why or why not?

Study guide, part 3: Topics for Research and Discussion

The study topics provided for book one of *The Hall of Doors* series, *The Mountains of the Moon*, can be applied to this book, and to the series as a whole. They include Cats in Literature, Fictional Worlds, Trading Places (identifying with the hero), Magic, and Change. Additional topics follow.

Topic #1: School Sports

Sammy and Kerri work hard at learning sports skills, such as shooting baskets, but have difficulty with others, including the rope climb. Different schools have different requirements and expectations regarding Physical Education and standardized fitness tests. While it's generally agreed that children need exercise for health, there is less agreement on the forms that exercise should take, and whether schools should offer programs such as organized sports. Some feel there should be more emphasis on academic subjects, and that students or their parents should pay fees for participation in sports programs.

What do the schools in your area require of students? Do they have regular PE classes? Are students expected to meet certain fitness standards? Are sports mandatory or elective? What facilities are available? Do students have to pay to participate?

Discuss the pros and cons of school sports. What do you think the schools should require, or provide, in the way of sports and exercise? Should physical education be a graded activity? Should there be choices of activities? If financing is an issue, who do you think should pay, and why?

Topic #2: Dealing With Phobias

Fear is a normal reaction to danger, and is probably essential to our survival. A person with no sense of fear might not think twice about diving off a cliff, approaching a growling dog, or stepping out into traffic without looking. Fear teaches us caution and encourages us to avoid high-risk activities. Phobias, on the other hand, are strong, irrational fears that go beyond the need for caution; they seem to be "hard-wired" into the brain and don't respond to any logical assurances that all is well. If you know anyone who gets hysterical at the mere glimpse of a spider, who is terrified of crossing bridges, or who, like Sammy, gets "the shakes" just looking down from a high place, you're familiar with phobias. A phobia can make it difficult for a person to function normally in society.

While phobias can't always be "cured" or eliminated, it's possible for a person to learn coping skills for dealing with the panic attacks and other manifestations of their fear. Sammy learns to get the help of a friend for encouragement, and to "do it scared" once she's determined that the activity is safe.

Research phobias and their treatment. What are some common phobias? Which ones might be likely to affect a person's quality of life, and why? What are some of the recommended treatments for phobias? What coping mechanisms might help in calming panic attacks?

Topic #3: Bullying and Harassment

One of the greatest fears of most children, and probably most adults as well, is the fear of embarrassment. Sammy is convinced that if she tries to climb the rope, she'll fall, and *everyone will laugh at her*. Her fear may be exaggerated, but it's not completely irrational. There are always going to be a few insensitive people who are amused at other people's misfortunes. One may have to learn to deal with a certain amount of good-natured teasing. That's just the way people are. Sammy's idea of laughing at herself before anyone else can start is one way to handle it.

Sometimes, though, the teasing and joking get out of hand. It can become harassment or bullying when a single person or a small group becomes the repeated object of taunting, teasing, or even physical attack. Many schools have developed programs to deal with bullying and intimidation. They try to resolve disputes and protect students from cruel and disruptive attacks. What policies are in place in your local schools? What should a student or group of students do when they feel they have been singled out for malicious treatment?

Topic #4 Dragons in Myth and Literature

Until recent times, most European myths and legends portrayed dragons as evil beings. Think of your typical fairy tale dragon, who lives in a cave full of ill-gotten treasure, venturing out to devour people and animals indiscriminately, burn the countryside, and demand the sacrifice of beautiful young women. The hero's job is to slay the terrible dragon, so everyone can live in peace and prosperity. In Asia, on the other hand, dragons were seen as powerful but respected beings, honored for their wisdom and knowledge. In recent years, many of the dragons of fantasy stories are allies of men, or at least not seen as intrinsically evil.

Winona's and Selena's friend, Kalindra, is one of the more pleasant dragons. She has a sense of humor, she's willing to give Selena and Sammy a ride, and she prefers Winona's fish stew to raw meat.

Name at least three stories (either short stories or longer works) featuring evil dragons, and three stories in which the dragons seem more friendly. Tell a little about each story. Which do you like best, and why?

Topic #5: Magical Devices

Selena's father, having recaptured his fortress at Ashenkeep, sends Winona a box found there. The box, sealed by a dark wizard's spell, turns out to contain many treasures that belonged to Selena's mother, including a magic mirror that lets her see how her father's doing.

In a science fiction story, problems are often solved with the aid of technology. In fantasy, there are magical devices that serve the same purpose. These powerful objects may not be good or evil in themselves—it's all a matter of how they're used. Name at least three magical devices in stories, and tell how they were used or misused.

Selena is relieved that the person who sealed up her mother's treasures apparently was unable to use them. Perhaps he couldn't deal with fairy magic, or perhaps he simply didn't know what they were or how to make them work. What might have been the result if the forces of Darkness had been able to use Tallia's mirror? What do you think *you* might do with a magic mirror?